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ABSTRACT

Although the role of reminiscence in subjective adjustment has been studied among older adults, very little research has examined the functions of reminiscence in the everyday lives of younger people. A study was conducted to extend previous work on reminiscence in the elderly to younger populations by exploring the relationship between reminiscence and subjective well-being in college students (N=140). Subjects completed questionnaires containing dependent measures pertaining to reminiscence and subjective well-being. The questionnaire contained both open- and closed-ended questions. Responses to open-ended questions were coded for analysis. The results revealed that, consistent with previous research, frequency of reminiscence was directly related to reported levels of positive affect. Furthermore, students who used imagery or relaxation as a cognitive strategy to intensify reminiscence reported greater well-being than those who used behavioral re-enactment or who looked at memorabilia to intensify reminiscence. Women reported greater positive affect; reminisced more frequently than did men; and were more likely to use it to gain perspective and self-insight, whereas men were more likely to use it to escape from the present and feel good. Results support the notion that adaptive styles of reminiscence can promote well-being in everyday life. (Author/NB)

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Abstract

This study extends previous work on reminiscence in the elderly to younger populations by exploring the relationship between reminiscence and subjective well-being in college students. Consistent with previous research, frequency of reminiscence was directly related to reported levels of positive affect. Furthermore, students who used imagery or relaxation as a cognitive strategy to intensify reminiscence reported greater well-being than those who used behavioral re-enactment or who looked at memorabilia to intensify reminiscence. Women reported greater positive affect, reminisced more frequently than did men, and were more likely to use it to gain perspective and self-insight, whereas men were more likely to use it to escape from the present and feel good. Results support the notion that adaptive styles of reminiscence can promote well-being in everyday life.

The Role of Reminiscence in Everyday Life

Although the role of reminiscence in subjective adjustment has been studied among older adults (e.g., Butler, 1963; Coleman, 1974; Havighurst & Glasser, 1972), very little research has examined the functions of reminiscence in the everyday lives of younger people. The process of reviewing one's life retrospectively appears to promote well-being among the elderly (Butler, 1963; Lieberman & Falk, 1971; Lewis, 1971). But it is unclear whether reminiscence serves a comparable function for younger people or whether indeed they engage in reminiscence in the same ways.

Accordingly, the present study had three purposes. First, we sought to determine the extent to which college students engage in reminiscence. Do they spend much time reminiscing? Under what conditions are they most likely to reminisce? Do women reminisce more than men? About what do they reminisce?

Second, we sought to identify the functions that reminiscence serves for college students. Is spending more time reminiscing related to greater subjective well-being? And do those who reminisce to gain perspective and self-insight report greater well-being than those who use reminiscence simply to escape the present?

Finally, we sought to identify particular strategies for intensifying reminiscence that were associated with greater subjective well-being. Do people who use some form of cognitive or behavioral strategy to intensify reminiscence report greater well-being than those who have no specific strategies for intensifying reminiscence? And, among those who have specific strategies, do people who use systematic cognitive strategies to reminisce (e.g., relaxing and trying to re-create a pleasant memory in one's mind) report greater well-being than those who rely mainly on behavioral strategies to reminisce (e.g., trying to re-enact a pleasant memory by putting oneself in similar surroundings)?

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 60 males and 80 females from two midwestern universities, who participated to partially fulfill an introductory psychology course requirement. The mean age was 19.48 (sd = 2.12 years), with no significant sex difference or sample difference in age. Because there were no consistent differences between samples across the dependent measures, the data of both college samples were pooled for subsequent analyses. Exact sample size varied across items due to incomplete and noncodeable data for some respondents.

Procedure & Dependent Measures

Groups of 10-15 students were administered an anonymous 10-page questionnaire containing dependent measures pertaining to reminiscence and subjective well-being. Five closed-ended items were designed to measure positive affective experience and one's perceived ability to enjoy positive outcomes (see Bradburn, 1969; Bryant, 1986; Bryant & Weaver, 1985). Two other closed-ended items tapped the frequency with which one reminisced about the past and about pleasant memories (see Havighurst & Glasser, 1972).

Eight open-ended items were designed to elicit spontaneous, unguided responses about how, when, and why people reminisce about pleasant memories. Among these items were questions assessing the content of voluntary reminiscence as well as people's experiences with sights, sounds, and smells that involuntarily trigger intense spontaneous reminiscence. After completing this questionnaire, respondents were thanked for participation and dismissed.

Development of Coding Schemes

In order to categorize and analyze answers to the open-ended items, it was necessary to develop qualitative coding schemes to capture the variety of subjects' responses. A random subset of respondents was used to generate an initial set of

coding categories that were then applied to a second random subset. These initial coding schemes were then revised for accuracy and comprehensiveness in an iterative fashion. This procedure was used because it preserves the richness of subjects' responses in a consistent, reliable manner (see Parten, 1950; Riley, 1963).

Two different coders were employed. Extensive systematic training procedures were used to maximize inter-coder reliability. Data indicate that coders agreed on over 95% of all coding judgments, with the few disagreements settled by discussion to eventual consensus.

Results

Reminiscence and Subjective Well-Being

Consistent with research using elderly samples (e.g., Havighurst & Glasser, 1972), the more time that college students reported reminiscing about the past, the higher their reported level of positive affect ($r = .27$, $n = 139$, $p < .001$). As predicted, those who used reminiscence primarily to gain perspective or self-insight (34.2%) tended to report a greater capacity to enjoy positive outcomes than did those who used reminiscence primarily to feel good by escaping to the past (13.5%), F (5,97) = 2.83, $p < .10$. In addition, the more sensory stimuli that subjects mentioned as triggers of intense spontaneous reminiscence, the higher the reported level of positive affect ($r = .20$, $n = 138$, $p < .05$).

With respect to strategies for intensifying reminiscence, people who used explicit, concrete techniques to promote recall reported greater positive affect than did those who lacked specific reminiscence strategies, F (1,136) = 4.44, $p < .01$. Furthermore, people who relied primarily on cognitive strategies (such as imagery or relaxation) to intensify recall tended to report greater positive affect than did those who relied primarily on behavioral strategies (such as physical re-enactment or looking at memorabilia), F (1,137) = 3.27, $p < .10$.

Sex Differences

Replicating recent research on reactivity to positive events (Bryant, 1986; Bryant & Weaver, 1985), women reported greater positive affect and a greater perceived capacity to enjoy positive outcomes than did men, F (1,137) = 16.04, $p < .0001$. Confirming earlier findings with older samples (e.g., Havighurst & Glasser, 1972), women also reported spending more time reminiscing than did men, F (1,139) = 6.40, $p < .05$. Supporting earlier research on reminiscence (e.g., Kiernat, 1983), more women (15.5%) reported reminiscing about memories of childhood relationships than did men (0%), χ^2 (5, n = 111) = 18.60, $p < .01$.

There were also differences in the primary function that reminiscence served for men and women. As seen in Table 1, women were more likely than men to use reminiscence to gain perspective and self-insight, whereas men were more likely than women to use reminiscence to escape and feel good, χ^2 (5, n = 111) = 18.60, $p < .01$. Women also reported more sensory stimuli that spontaneously triggered intense reminiscence than did men, F (1,130) = 4.68, $p < .05$.

Discussion

An important finding of the present study is that the more often college students reminisced, the more well-being they reported. This result is consistent with research in older populations (e.g., Butler, 1963; Havighurst & Glasser, 1972) and suggests that reminiscence serves an adaptive function in the everyday lives of younger adults.

The present data also shed light on how different styles of reminiscence relate to psychological well-being. People who had specific strategies for intensifying reminiscence reported that they enjoy life more than people who lacked these specific strategies. Moreover, those who used cognitive imagery and relaxation to intensify recall reported greater positive affect than did those who used behavioral re-enactment or memorabilia to intensify reminiscence.

The present results also suggest that using reminiscence to gain perspective and self-insight is associated with greater subjective well-being, whereas using reminiscence to escape and feel good is associated with lower subjective well-being. The adaptive value of reminiscence in everyday life may be not so much as a form of escape from present problems, but rather as a tool for increasing awareness and a sense of perspective in the present.

The present findings also suggest that women are more likely than men to use reminiscence in ways that promote subjective well-being. Women not only reminisced more often than did men, but they were also more likely to use reminiscence to gain perspective and self-insight. Men were more likely to reminisce in order to escape and feel better--a purpose that was associated with lower well-being. Women also appear to be more sensitive than men to sensory stimuli that spontaneously evoke intense reminiscence. These findings are discussed in the context of sex-role stereotypes and differential socialization that may make women better able or more willing than men to use reminiscence in ways that enhance subjective well-being.

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Table 1

The purposes of reminiscence for men and women

Purposes of Reminiscence	Men (n=46)		Women (n=65)	
	n	%	n	%
To gain positive affect	14	30.4	11	16.9
To escape the present and feel good	10	21.7	5	7.7
To gain perspective and self-insight	6	13.0	32	49.2
To gain "bittersweet" feelings	4	8.7	6	9.2
For pure escape only	4	8.7	5	7.7

$[\chi^2(4, n=111) = 18.60, p < .01]$

Note: These data are based on an open-ended question that asked respondents to describe what effects typically occurred when they reminisced about pleasant memories.